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The Psychological Process of Value Formation

JAIME C. BULATAO, S.J.

“Value” is an interesting concept. Money has value because it can be exchanged for a variety of goods. Money can change in value and can even be said to float. The paper or metal it is made of has little or no value, but value is attributed to money by people. Shoes, clothes, cars have value and their value also changes in relation with how desirable they become in a given situation, the desirability varying according to circumstances like rarity of supply. In all of these objects, value is not seen as the object itself but something *added to the object by the mind*. Whatever is deemed by the mind as a goal worth striving for is given value. Value, goods, good. Value is what is experienced as good.

Not only goods but even people differ in value. Family members are typically more valuable than strangers. Thus, value is something subjective. What is experienced as good by one is not necessarily so experienced by another. The same will hold true for the more abstract goods of life; art, science, politics, freedom, popularity, etc., which are experienced by some as important but not so experienced by others. What is the psychological process by which a person learns to value one thing more than the other?

Research is going on today for a better understanding of the process of values formation. It has become clear that one does not teach values like honesty, truthfulness, generosity, marital fidelity, etc., in the same way that one teaches objective things like arithmetic or geography. Some even wonder if values can be

taught at all and advocate instead a process of value clarification.¹ What we seem to be looking for at the moment is a way of thinking about value formation, a conceptual model that can help us understand this process whether or not we can do anything to modify or guide it. The purpose of this note is to recall the contributions of two great schools of psychological thought of this century, the Freudian and the Behaviorist, and to propose a synthesis that may help map the process of value learning a bit more realistically.

FREUD: SUPEREGO AND IDENTIFICATION

Sigmund Freud made a significant contribution to our understanding of value formation when from his clinical experience he described the Oedipal stage of the child which ended in the formation of the superego.² In this process of superego formation, the essential element was "identification." The child identified with the like-sexed parent, taking the parent as it were, inside of him, and in so doing created in himself a living guide as to what was good and what was wrong. The superego was in great part unconscious and performed its supportive as well as guilt-inducing task silently. But a part of it which Freud named the ego-ideal was conscious and it mirrored the person's ideals and ambitions.

While Freud maintained that the superego was formed and the main identification set in the preschool child, he left room for other identifications to arise: with teachers, with the peer group (*barkada*), with ideal personalities. But his key concept in this process was identification, which was already at work soon after birth in the child's symbiotic relation with the mother, in the way the child learned the mother's language down to the minutest tone and accent. The process continues all the way to when spouses often become like each other and have one mind with each other. It is noteworthy that learning by identification occurs within a relationship. There is a merging of subjectivities. Rather than a conscious objective learning with concepts, much of it is uncon-

1. Brian Hall, *Value Clarification as Learning Process* (New York: Paulist Press, 1973).

2. Sigmund Freud, "The Ego and the Id" (1923), *Standard Edition*, 1961, vol. 19, pp. 12-59.

scious imitation. Today we call such learning deuterio-learning, as opposed to the proto-learning by direct conceptual process.³

Freud made a magnificent contribution to our understanding of the process of values formation. He stressed the importance of parents and family. Even today in the Philippines, the questions we ask about a daughter's boy friend when he begins to get serious are: Does he come from a good family? Are the parents stable? The assumption is that the son's values will reflect those of the parents, and a polygamous father will very likely have a polygamous son.

THE BEHAVIORIST VIEW

Behaviorism was the dominant paradigm of American psychology from the 1920's until the 1950's. Since behaviorists did not believe in mind, neither did they believe in values, but instead thought in terms of the probability of behavior. Their principle was: "That behavior will prevail which is most reinforced." Thus, honesty at the polls will become prevalent when honest politicians win.

Social applications of this theory seem to have had some success. For instance, Singapore has become a cleaner city since social conditioning was applied, i.e., high fines for littering, publication of names and faces of those arrested, etc. But on the other hand, there have been failures: "Sa ikauunlad ng bayan, disiplina ang kailangan." Yes, but where now is the discipline and, worse, where is the *kaunlaran*?

Values are not taught by propaganda or by reasoning: most people argue that discipline is good, that war is hell, that violence in the streets is undesirable. But such arguments do not necessarily curtail aggression. Values are not taught directly, the way behavior is taught. Values are not necessarily taught by punishment, to make a child "think twice." In fact, some research indicates that parents who use severe punishment tend to produce children who are extremely aggressive.⁴ The simple stimulus-response theory

3. Cf. Gregory Bateson, *Mind and Nature* (New York: Bantam Books, 1979), pp. 101-41.

4. Robert Sear, et al., *Patterns of Child Rearing* (Evanston, Ill.: Row, Peterson, 1957).

of the behaviorist does not seem to fit here. A better explanation is that parents who use harsh punishment are usually harsh and aggressive people themselves. The children merely copy them, or as Freud would say, the children "identify with the aggressor." But interestingly enough, if the punishment comes from an adult who previously treated his children as a warm, nurturant parent, the children tend to comply even in the parent's absence. What becomes effective, then, for value formation is not the punishment, which can have opposite effects, but the inner love and integrity of the parent. The simple stimulus-response theory does not work.

What is important is the context of the stimulus because the context can change the *meaning* of the stimulus and thus change the stimulus itself as perceived.⁵ And it is how the stimulus is perceived that is important. A politician in the Philippines who says "I have never cheated in an election" can under certain circumstances bring derision on his own head. There is a joke in the University belt about teachers who give a mark of INC (incomplete), the meaning of which is perceived as "I need cash." A whole generation of Filipinos is growing up in a context of double-meaning, manipulated information, dishonest censorship, political promises, outright lying. What values can they learn?

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH

If we were to remove from the Freudian model its typically Victorian niceties (e.g., castration fears, etc.) we could accept the process of the superego formation as a whole including the essential element of identification with parents. It would provide us with a valid, basic model for understanding the formation of values. We can, then, see why children of the same parents will tend to have similar values, even when talents, expressions and achievements can be quite different. So, too, a cultural group will tend to have similar values. (The 1960s and the 1970s witnessed intense research efforts to identify so-called Filipino cultural values on the assumption that Filipinos have a set of values typical of them as a cultural group.)

But values do not come full-blown with the coming into being

5. John Grinder and Richard Bandler, *Reframing* (Moab, Utah: Real People Press, 1982).

of the superego. For instance, the value of science felt in his soul by a mature scientist would only have been *in ovo* at the age of five or six. As a psychic heritage from his parents, it may have taken the form of curiosity and a need to understand why shadows are longer in the morning than at noon or how telegrams can come so fast. There was a joy in taking clocks apart and putting them together again. Later on, there were encounters with an older brother who built a radio, with a teacher who introduced him to logarithms and to computers. He may have done the same experiments in class as his thirty-nine other classmates, but with the difference that while the others did the experiments because these were part of schoolwork, he *liked* doing the experiments. The same teacher, the same experiments, the same objective stimulus, but his response was different because his organism was different. It had grown from the identification he had had, beginning with the parents, with the brother, the teacher, the significant others. And values are not objective stimuli to be learned through proto-learning. Rather, they are subjective, "organic" states which have grown with the learner and are *projected* on the objective stimulus and endow it with a feeling of value and an aura of desirability. Values are from the mind and in the mind, but they are very real.

THE PROCESS

A phenomenological analysis of a growth giving encounter with the value as in the case of our budding scientists in physics class may here be valuable. First, S perceives a science situation, maybe a teacher demonstrating a laser. This perception vivifies in his unconscious memory various images out of the past together with feelings of goodness and shouldness associated with those images. Instantly and without awareness, these images and feelings fuse with the situation and suffuse it with a glow of goodness and value. Thus, this total science situation is *experienced* as valuable and is stored in memory to be added to those already there. The organism now has within itself this growing value of science and in the future by selective attention will be ready and on the lookout for other opportunities of encountering the object it values. Thus, at every encounter with the value, S grows in this value in ever broadening spirals like a snail's spiral shell.

The fact that there has to be a predisposition in the organism in order for the organism to give a value laden response to the stimulus situation explains why different individuals seem to "choose" to respond to different values. Whether the object to-be-valued is law and order, or science, or art, the values of these realities cannot be perceived unless the organism already possesses these values at least *in ovo* and continues to respond to these values. One can see that these realities are fundamentally good in themselves, but it is the human mind that actualizes such values. The mind is, thus, creative in the very act of setting up a value which was not there before. And in this act there is some freedom of choice on the part of the organism, at least in its willingness to turn attention to the invitation of the stimulus and thus to develop along the line of one value. The organism to some extent can be said to choose the value.

There is even greater freedom in the choice of the expression for a value. For instance, the same value of love of country can make a young girl go to the hills to join the NPA or work with the Human Settlements or become a Sister Stella L in order to fight for workers' rights. The value may be the same but the choice of action will depend on the girl's choice. It will also depend on other values in her hierarchy of values, e.g., religious values, that are being aroused at the same time. Also, decisions for action will depend on the amount of information available at the time of decision. Authoritarian regimes all over the world typically seek to limit the amount of information made available to the citizenry in the hope that their citizens will decide in favor of the government's policies. That they often succeed in thus manipulating behavior is a lamentable fact. The process in which a real value is actualized into behavior that really works contrary to the value itself is what is usually termed a "distortion of values."

True growth in values assumes that the growing person can be accorded full respect as an autonomous person. Neither manipulation on one hand nor "non-directiveness" on the other make for growth. The teacher is often left in the position of a jeepney driver who can only pick up passengers who are already willing to go in the direction he is going. And even then, the passenger may not want to go all the way but will step off ("Sa tabi lang, ho") somewhere along the way. The passenger, not the jeepney driver, is the

king. He picks the route he will go. But it is the jeepney driver who provides him the opportunity to move nearer his goal. The teacher is still important in helping the student grow in values he already has to some extent, as well as in guiding the expression of those values along socially beneficial lines.

EDUCATION FOR VALUES

The teacher is also a human being with his own system of values. Early in his career he comes to realize that he cannot directly transfer his values to the student. (You can lead a horse to water but you cannot make him drink.) The best he can do is to be true to his own values and to let his actions and words be congruent with his own deep self. Then he must enter into relationship with his pupils, hopefully friendly, certainly just, but always personal.

Often in a classroom, the relationship that the student sets up with the teacher is a repetition of the relationship with his father or mother. This is what Freud called the transference relationship. Where the transference is negative it has to be interpreted and discussed, otherwise, there will be little learning. Where the transference is positive and the teacher is emotionally mature, the relationship becomes an opportunity for growth. Identifications are facilitated. (The teacher begins to notice his gestures and phrases being mirrored by the class.) And years later, an alumnus comes to his former math teacher and says "You know what I learned from you in your math class? I learned to always tell the truth."

Emotionally immature teachers can do harm. For instance, a female teacher, just out of college, developed a counter-transference relationship with a male high school student, i.e., fell in love with him. She ultimately had to be asked to resign. (After all, school administrators also have values and must enforce society's rules.) Teachers also may stand in need of value clarification. The person of the teacher, his integrity and the congruence of his behavior with his values, becomes the principal means of growth. The teaching of principles of behavior found in books of Ethics and Moral Theology has little meaning (at least for Filipinos) apart from the living embodiment of such principles in significant persons with whom they relate.

Administrators often ask for concrete measures they can take in value training. When one realizes that "values are caught not taught" and that there are no hard and fast rules apart from being true to oneself, the task of the administrator is reduced mainly to the selection and training of his teachers. The teachers are the ones with whom the students will identify. They must, therefore, embody the values that the school aims to develop. And they, too, must grow following the same process as their students.

It is also important to realize that there is a limit to the right of schools to develop particular values in their students. Values, arising as they do from the individual's personal experience and personal choice, possess a certain God-given absoluteness that must be respected. Respect for other's values must be taught to students, and the school itself should be the first to respect the values of its teachers and students.

Finally, the element of personal choice in values must be emphasized. One cannot properly appreciate a value unless one already possesses it. It takes a dealer in pearls to appreciate a pearl, but then he must choose to buy it when offered:

The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it (Mt. 13. 45-46).

He *chose* to buy it.